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How Former Apple Music Mastermind Larry Jackson Signed Mariah Carey To His \$400 Million Startup

When You Believe: "What Larry Jackson is building at Gamma," Carey tells Forbes, "is beyond music."

ETHAN GREENE

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Gamma is releasing the 16th album by the Queen of Christmas. And with her new single, "Type Dangerous," she's coming for the Beatles' throne.

round midnight, the day after Halloween, Mariah Carey was sitting in the lavish Bel Air mansion of music producer Antonio "L.A." Reid. The 56-year-old Carey may

be one of the top-selling recording artists of all-time—with five Grammy awards and 19 number-one hits (the most by any solo artist)—but she still solicits the opinion of Reid, a friend of more than 20 years, and the man who shaped the careers of Usher, TLC, Pink and other artists as the chairman of Epic, Arista, and Island Def Jam record labels. Also in the attendance was Larry Jackson, the 44-year-old CEO of the two-year-old music startup, Gamma.

As Carey played tracks from her upcoming 16th album, Jackson, who has been in the business for more than 30 years, was awestruck by the moment. “Why am I in this room?” he recalls thinking. But as Carey told him, “I know who you are. I know what you've done. And I think you're the right person to take me to new heights.”

With the midnight release of Carey’s new single, “[Type Dangerous](#),” the ultimate

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equivalent of LeBron James breaking Kareem Abdul-Jabbar’s NBA all-time scoring record. And Carey is counting on Jackson to put her on top of music’s Mount Olympus

“I think that Larry might be downplaying his popularity,” Reid tells *Forbes*. “Mariah Carey knows who Larry Jackson is.”

A founding member of Beats Music with Dr. Dre and producer Jimmy Iovine, and one of the masterminds behind Apple Music, Jackson started in the industry at 11, as an intern at KMEL radio station in San Francisco and became music director at 16. “It would be unthinkable today,” he says of the gig. “But these were more unregulated times.” Jackson soon began being mentored by Clive Davis, the

legendary founder and CEO of Arista Records, who launched the career of Whitney Houston, among many other artists.

Throughout his career, Jackson produced the late Luther Vandross, once managed Kanye West and produced Houston's last studio album. He eventually moved to Interscope records to work with Iovine, who later co-founded Beats with Dr. Dre. In 2014, the company sold to Apple for more than \$3 billion, which is how Jackson became the creative force behind Apple Music.

"I didn't graduate high school and didn't go to college," Jackson told *Billboard* about his career trajectory in 2023. "My university was working with Clive. Graduate school was working with Jimmy."

After seven years at Apple, Jackson did what few executives in Cupertino ever do—he left to start his own venture. He launched Gamma in 2023 with backing from billionaire Todd Boehly's Eldridge Industries, the independent film studio A24, and Apple itself. Gamma soon acquired Vydia, the New Jersey-based digital distribution company that serves as its technology platform, signed deals with Usher and Rick Ross, and took a stake in the Death Row records archive, which Snoop Dogg purchased the previous year. Late last year, Gamma also partnered with Snoop and jewelry entrepreneur Carolyn Rafaelian, the founder of Metal Alchemist and Alex and Ani, to launch Snoop's jewelry brand, Lovechild.

"He's as a straight shooter as it gets," Boehly says of Jackson. "And he cares more about the artists and wants them to build their businesses and think differently about what the opportunities are, and not just go down the traditional [label] path. I see entrepreneurs backing entrepreneurs in a world that's becoming more entrepreneurial. And you've got great artists like Snoop and Usher and now Mariah Carey coming to Larry because they're becoming more entrepreneurial."



Solid Gold: One of Jackson's Gamma ventures is Lovechild, a new jewelry brand by Snoop Dogg.

OLIVIA WONG/GETTY IMAGES

“What Larry Jackson is building at Gamma,” Carey tells *Forbes*, “is beyond music. It's a cultural shift, and I'm excited to be part of something that honors legacy while pushing boundaries. This next chapter is about owning my narrative and creating freely on my own terms.”

Adds Reid, who will executive-produce Carey's album under his new company, Mega, “It is a game-changing moment because it's one of our premier stars who has made a decision to join forces with an independent, self-contained company that is not associated with any of the major labels. It's a game changer for both Gamma and Mariah.”

Jackson and Carey chose June, which is Black Music Month, to make their partnership official. The parties tell *Forbes* they agreed to a multi-album deal as she aims for music history.

“I don't have a crystal ball,” Reid says. “But my intuition tells me that this one works. She's fighting to stay contemporary. He's fighting to stay contemporary, to be contemporary. I think it's a win-win.”

Born in San Francisco in 1980, Jackson is the son of a college instructor and technology engineer. His father worked for years at publicly traded Advanced Micro Devices (AMD) before meeting Jackson's mom and becoming a professor. “I came from a very strong-rooted house,” says Jackson, says of his parents, who are still married after more than 50 years. “I learned what *not* to do more than what to do.”

By eight, a young Larry fell in love with music by watching the *Showtime at the Apollo* on Saturday nights. The program fine-tuned Jackson's ear for music, and by 17 he had dropped out of high school to focus on his job as the music director of KMEL. The first station to fully embrace hip-hop and R&B culture on the West Coast, KMEL gave afternoon airplay time to the likes of MC Hammer, Tony! Toni! Toné!, Digital Underground, and E-40.

“I remember seeing Green Day play [the] Bottom of the Hill [club] in San Francisco for 50 people before they blew up,” Jackson recalls. “These were all the things that I was exposed to very early on. These were all the people that came through the radio station that I saw.”

In 2000, Jackson's mentor at KMEL, Keith Naftaly joined Davis at the newly launched J Records after the duo's ouster at Arista. Expanding their A&R staff, Davis called Jackson who was playing records at KMEL that turned into hits. “I took the meeting and came with a hit,” Jackson says. The song was Vandross' *Take You Out*. “I got the job right on the spot.”

“I didn’t just come here by accident,” he continues. “You really don’t understand the journey and the sacrifice and the hard work of how someone got to where they are. So, you realize when you hear someone’s story that there are levels to this.”

With a clear decline in the number of Black executives who shape music, following the deaths of towering figures like [Quincy Jones](#) and [Clarence Avant](#), Jackson sees an opportunity for disruption with Gamma—much like how [Berry Gordy](#) changed music with Motown in the 1960s. (Gordy sold the groundbreaking label in 1988 for \$61 million, or about \$167 million today.) “If you look around the [music] business in terms of leadership,” he says, “there’s nobody who looks like me.”

In many ways, Jackson’s career is coming full circle this week. On Wednesday, he was in New York to present Davis with a Lifetime Achievement award at the same Apollo Theater he once dreamed about as a kid. Back in his hotel room, he wants to enjoy the moment and also prepare for Carey’s single release.



Music Men: Jackson presented his mentor, Clive Davis, with the Legacy Award at the Apollo Theater in Harlem this week.
SHAHHAR AZRAN/GETTY IMAGES

The [teaser video](#) for “[Type Dangerous](#),” Jackson says, had more than six million views, “and that’s just between Instagram and X.” He sees that as a healthy sign there is pent-up demand for a new Carey album. Only this time, Gamma can control its own algorithm with the help of Apple to make sure Carey gets maximum exposure. “She’s been a part of the machine for her entire career,” he says.

“It's about unfinished business and it's about independence,” Jackson adds. “A lot of companies are really focused on frothy, viral, trendy, TikTok hits versus really understanding the art form of artist development and what it takes to work with a diva. And it takes having a different kind of master's degree or a PhD to really understand exactly how to guide a career of that particular nature at this particular time.”

**This article has been updated to reflect the correct name of Eldridge Industries.*

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